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AUTHOR MacMullin, Colin
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ABSTRACT

When researchers evaluate social skills programs, they essentially are measuring progress towards a goal. How they measure this progress hinges on the precision of the goal statements, the identification of valid and realistic process and outcome indicators, and the selection of appropriate data and methods for collection. This paper outlines the necessary steps for evaluating social skills programs. It is argued that evaluating such programs involves the same processes used in any evaluation exercise. The paper opens with a discussion of how to establish aims and goals, including a seven-step process for setting goals. Process and outcome indicators are outlined next, along with a series of questions and specific indicators for social goals. The paper then discusses some of the data needed to measure progress and the instruments and procedures that can be used for measurement, such as interviews, questionnaires, sociometric techniques, and commercial tests. A discussion on commercial and other off-the-shelf instruments is also presented. It is emphasized that measuring progress requires careful planning but such efforts will be rewarded with increased confidence in evaluation conclusions. (RJM)

EVALUATING SOCIAL SKILLS PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS

COLIN MACMULLIN
FLINDERS UNIVERSITY

Before embarking on a description and discussion of the procedures involved in evaluating social skills programs, we first need to address the question of why. Why bother evaluating social skills programs in schools? Surely, it is enough for us to trust our own judgments about whether our programs are working or not. Yes, the practitioner's personal evaluation of program effectiveness is important, but we need to know that we are using our resources - time, energy and any financial cost involved - and our students' time in the most effective way possible. Most areas of the school curriculum are able to be evaluated through the examination system. This does not generally apply to the social skills curriculum. However, if we are going to take the social development of our students seriously, then we must apply the same standards of program evaluation to this part of the curriculum as we do to mathematics, English and the other subjects that we teach in our schools. It is interesting to note that of some 400 schools that proposed social skills programs for inclusion in the AGCA publication on Teaching ProSocial Skills to Adolescents (Prescott, 1995), less than a dozen were able to report that they had conducted any kind of formal evaluation into the effectiveness of their programs.

We need to know to whether our programs to reduce bullying are working Are the social problem solving programs that we are using resulting in increased social competence for our students? How effective are the conflict resolution strategies that we are teaching our students? Are we making any headway in helping that 10% of our students population who do not have any friends at all at school? If so, what is working, what is making the difference?

Evaluating social skills programs involves essentially the same processes that would be employed in any evaluation exercise: (1) clear statements of the aims and goals of the program; (2) descriptions of process- and/or outcome-indicators - that is, descriptions of the behaviour and feelings of students, teachers, parents and others that we would expect to indicate that we are making progress towards our goals; (3) identification of the data, or information that we would need to let us know if we are achieving (or have achieved) our goals; (4) identification of the methods and instruments that we could use to collect these data; and (5) procedures for analysing and interpreting this information in light of the aims and goals of our programs.

AIMS AND GOALS

The first question to ask is: what is the overall aim of my project? The purpose of such an aim would be to declare one's intent to do something - in this case about the social world of school - and to describe a general outcome that is desired. An example of such an aim would be: *The aim of this project is to reduce the amount of playground violence in the school.*

Evaluation of broadly stated aims can often be difficult. However, if these aims are operationalised into specific goals, then evaluation becomes more feasible. Gerard Egan (1994) suggests seven requirements for setting goals. A goal should be:

- stated as an accomplishment
- behaviourally clear and specific
- measurable or verifiable
- substantive
- in keeping with the values of those concerned, and
- set within a reasonable time frame

Goals stated in such a way are more likely to be achieved, than those that are left vague and woolly, such as: "our goal is the provide a safe and happy environment for all students". This is indeed a laudable goal, but it might be difficult to measure the school's progress towards its accomplishment. However, if we were to ask questions that operationalised this goal, such as: *what sort of things would students be doing in a peaceful school?* or future-oriented questions such as: *what would be happening in our peaceful school of the future that is not happening now?* , we would be in a better position to know the extent to which our efforts were helping us make progress towards our goal.

PROCESS AND OUTCOME INDICATORS

We can again turn to Egan (1994) for further examples of the kinds of future-oriented questions that will help us know when we have achieved our goals, or the extent to which we are making progress towards their achievement. Egan suggests that we pose questions like:

- What would the current situation look like if it were better?
- What would be happening if things were fractionally better?
- What would be happening if things were dramatically better?
- What would students (or staff) be doing that they are not doing now/
- What would they stop doing?
- What accomplishments would be in place?
- What would be happening that is not happening now?
- What would this opportunity look like if it were developed?

In reflecting upon our own programs, we need to ask ourselves: *what behaviour or action would indicate that are goals are being achieved?* Questions like this, posed in the present tense, lead us to *process* indicators which contribute to formative evaluation procedures. The kinds of questions that ask what sorts of actions indicate that are goal have been achieved (past tense) lead us to outcome indicators which serve summative evaluation procedures. Examples of process and outcome indicators for social goals could include:

- fewer outbursts in class or playground
- students are more cooperative
- students are less isolated
- fewer students are spending time in "time out"
- a particular student is smiling more
- teacher reporting improved relationships with his/her students
- parent reporting less difficulty in getting student off to school
- students seeking less help from teachers to resolve conflicts during recess time

Process and outcome indicators can be identified to sample students' and teachers' feelings and behaviour for both groups are likely to be affected as a result of a social skills program. Such indicators may extend to descriptions of new whole-of-school procedures, and also include changes in parents' actions and feelings.

DATA THAT ARE NEEDED

While process and outcome indicators can give us an idea of the kinds of changes to look for in the evaluation process, we may need to measure certain behaviours in order to make a valid judgments about our goals. Basically, we ask: *what information will let us know if we are achieving (or have achieved) our goals?* Applied to some of the indicators above, we may need

to ask: what information will tell us if students are less isolated, or more cooperative, or spending less time in "time out"? Similarly, we may need to identify the kinds of information that will let us know if teachers are experiencing improved relationships with their students, or if students are being harassed less by their classmates. This kind of information, usually quantitative in nature, may be essential in determining whether on not goals have been achieved.

A second type of data may allow us to go beyond merely answering the question: "to what extent have goals between achieved?" Here, we ask the question: "what information will be useful to us in understanding what is happening?" For example, a recent study by Owens and MacMullin (1995) reported the incidence of different types of aggression among boys and girls at various ages. This study found more indirect aggression amongst adolescent girls than amongst adolescent boys. These same procedures could be used to measure any changes in aggression rates that may result from an intervention program. However, the data that Owens & MacMullin collected tell us very little about the *nature* of indirect aggression among adolescent girls. School-based evaluation projects may focus on what is happening and why it is happening. We need to go beyond the quantitative appraisals of our social skills programs to ask questions like: why was this program successful, or not successful? What part of our intervention made the real difference? What kinds of things need to happen in order for our programs to be more effective? These kinds of questions suggest qualitative as well as quantitative data.

INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES

Having determined the kinds of information that are needed in order to answer our evaluations questions, we now need to select sources of that information and procedures and instruments to gather it. Data sources and gathering techniques include:

interviews
questionnaires
checklists
records of events
journals or diaries
samples of students' work
direct observation notes
photographs
video- and audiotapes
personal reflections (field notes)
teacher made tests
sociometric techniques
commercial tests

A number of things need to be considered when we develop our own instruments. When employing observations, we need to decide whether to use naturalist and/or contrived situations. We need to consider whether we will be covert, overt, or participant observers. We also need to decide upon direct or video-recorded methods of observing, and whether our observations will be scheduled in any way or totally open-ended.

Similarly, our plans to interview people need to consider whether to use schedules or open-ended questions. Of course, much thought needs to be given to the questions themselves. We will also need to give thought to the methods we will employ in collecting the interview data. These are likely to include: tape-recording (and later transcribing) the whole interview, scribing answers as they are delivered, or attending fully to the interviewee and writing up the

responses from memory post hoc. Decisions about individual versus group interviews may also be important.

In developing and using surveys and questionnaires we will need to attend to questions of sampling - both the domain that we wish to investigate (validity) as well as the population of people from whom we seek information (reliability). Other issues involved include decisions about face-to-face versus mail versus telephone surveying, types of questions and types of answering systems.

While home-made procedures and instruments provide us with an opportunity to collect information that is specific to our evaluate tasks, we need to know that these endeavours may be particularly time-consuming, and sometimes may involve us in re-inventing the wheel.

COMMERCIAL AND OTHER OFF-THE-SHELF INSTRUMENTS

There are a number of commercial instruments available in Australia to measure aspects of children's social competence. Domains include: self esteem, social status and peer relationships, social skills, adaptive behaviour, behaviour checklists, measures of classroom environment, and inventories of problematic situations. For a complete list of these instruments see MacMullin (1995).

Issues to bear in mind in using off-the-shelf instruments include: permission, suitability, time, expertise, and cost. It is a generally excepted practice that unless the instrument or procedure that you use can be considered part of normal teaching, parental permission is required before children can be subjected to your procedures. With respect to suitability, many off-the-shelf instruments are designed for individual administration and may not be suitable for use with groups of students. We should also be aware that some instruments are designed for particular groups of students, e.g. those with an intellectual disability, or those with a behaviour disorder. These may not be suitable for general administration.

It is useful to point out that many instruments are particularly time-consuming, and some may make excessive demands on teachers and/or students. Financial costs will also need to be considered as most test protocols are covered by copyright.

A final word of advice concerns expertise. While many of the commercial instruments are able to be administered by teachers, some are restricted to psychologists only. Look out for any legal restrictions that may be placed on particular instruments and recognise the skills that an educational psychologist may be able to bring to your evaluation project.

CONCLUSION

When we attempt to evaluate social skills programs, we are essentially asking: to what extent have we made progress towards the goals of our program? Our capacity to answer this question hinges largely on the precision of our goal statements, our identification of valid and realistic process and outcome indicators, and our selection of appropriate data and methods for their collection. This process requires careful planning. However, the time and care devoted to such planning is not likely to be wasted, for evaluators should be rewarded with a greater sense of confidence in the conclusions that they are able to draw from their work.

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Signature:	Position: SENIOR LECTURER
Printed Name: COLIN MACMULLIN	Organization: FLINDERS UNIVERSITY
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